



## A Simple Solution to Juvenile Crime: Invest In KIDS

James C. Backstrom\*  
Dakota County Attorney  
September 16, 2002

It is a scary world out there today for our children and for us all. We now live in a world of unparalleled access to information through the mere touch of a button on a computer keyboard. Technological advances exist today that amaze the senses and bring both wonder and fear into our lives. Unfortunately, with these rapidly evolving advances have also come the dangerous influences of crime and violence.

We are at a critical point today in our efforts to effectively respond to juvenile crime in America. We are continuing to see horrendous acts of violence across our nation at a time when overall juvenile crime rates are actually falling. We are seeing a rise in the number of teenagers as our baby boom population has brought new generations of children into this world. Easy access to the Internet now affords our children with both the blessing of easily acquired new knowledge and the curse of dangerous influences that come with it. Sexual predators have a new and easy means of locating child victims through chat lines or other Internet communication networks and our children can readily access sexually graphic and violent material at the push of a button.

Television shows and movies increasingly portray acts of gratuitous violence - and don't think for one minute that these messages are being lost on our kids. Any child who views the weekly displays of professional wrestling on television, for example, will quickly begin to believe that the best way to resolve a conflict is to hit someone over the head with a chair and that it is appropriate to taunt, demean, or punch another person with whom you disagree. Violent video games that teach the art of killing are also far too accessible. Our children have access to more violent influences today than ever before.

We are also at a crossroads of widening the gap between poverty and prosperity in America. Consequently, we are seeing even more at-risk kids in our country – children at risk of becoming the victims of abuse or tomorrow's criminals.

How do we address these issues? It is not as difficult or as hopeless as it might at first seem. We have long known the way to prevent much of this from occurring. It's really pretty simple. We need to invest in our kids before it's too late.

---

\* James C Backstrom has served as the Dakota County Attorney in Hastings, Minnesota since 1987. He is a member of the Board of Directors of the National District Attorneys Association and co-chaired that organization's Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee from 1993-2001. He is also an advisory member of Fight Crime: Invest In Kids. He can be reached at 651-438-4438.

We need to insure that every child who is born out of wedlock, or who is part of a family unit that ceases to exist as a result of divorce, receives the child support to which they are legally entitled. We need to assure that all infants and preschool children have access to quality educational childcare programs. We need to assure that school-age children, especially teens, have access to after-school, weekend and summer youth development programs. We need to help schools identify troubled and disruptive children at an early age and provide these children and their parents with the counseling and training necessary to help these kids get back on track. We need to aggressively pursue truancy from school and insure that all children receive the quality education they require to succeed in today's complex world. We need to improve deficient parenting and protect children by offering in-home parental coaching and counseling services when appropriate. We need to make sure every at-risk child in this country has access to the mentoring and counseling and educational programs that they so desperately require. We need to insure that police, prosecutors, and child protection workers are sufficiently funded and trained to quickly and effectively intervene, help and protect children who have been abused or neglected. We need Congress and the state legislatures of America to make funding for early intervention and prevention initiatives a priority.

Doing these simple but important things will go a long way in America to ensure that our children grow up strong, healthy, educated and law abiding. We have the means and capability to make these investments in our children today. By doing so, we will be investing in our future and there is no wiser investment that can be made. Investing in kids in these ways will not only help our children reach their full potential, it will also reduce crime and save money in the long run.

Scientific research of programs funded in many of these important areas prove their effectiveness. For example, in Ypsilanti, Michigan, the High School Educational Research Foundation randomly admitted half of the at-risk three and four year old applicants to its quality preschool center and provided their parents with in-home coaching and parenting skills for an hour and half each week. Twenty-two years after this program ended, the children receiving these services were found to be **just one-fifth as likely** as kids denied the services to be chronic lawbreakers.<sup>1</sup> In another study in Syracuse, New York, at-risk kids who were provided early childhood services and access to a high quality preschool program were found to be **only one-tenth as likely** as kids denied these services to be delinquent by age 16.<sup>2</sup> Other research has shown that even programs that serve only a limited number of children have significantly reduced juvenile victimization during after school hours. One such study has shown that with intensive recruiting, after-school programs have cut crime by as much as seventy-five percent in some high crime neighborhoods.<sup>3</sup> Another study concluded that participants in after-school programs are more likely to do well in school, to treat adults with respect, and to resolve conflicts without violence.<sup>4</sup>

It is also commonly known today that youth who are neglected or abused in their early years run a significantly greater risk of acting out violently when they become teenagers. With almost three million American children reported as being abused or neglected every year, we need to make sure that law enforcement officials and child protection staff have sufficient resources to apprehend and prosecute juvenile offenders and identify and treat abused and neglected children. Studies in this area have once again shown the importance of reducing

violence and criminal behavior. For example, The Prenatal and Early Infancy Project<sup>5</sup> assigned half a group of at-risk mothers to receive visits by specially trained nurses who provided coaching and parenting skills and other advice and support. This program was shown not only to **reduce child abuse by 80 percent** in the first two years, but showed that after 15 years following the ending of these services, these mothers had only one-third as many arrests, and their children were **only half as likely** to be delinquent. A similar “Healthy Start” Program<sup>6</sup> in Hawaii which offered at-risk mothers preventive health care and home visits by para-professionals who coached them in parenting skills and child development and offered family counseling, showed that over a four-year period those who had not received such services were **more than 2-1/2 times as likely** to have a confirmed instance of child abuse within their families.

Doing all we can to identify troubled and disruptive children at an early age and providing these children and their parents with counseling and training can also help avoid future criminal behavior. A Montreal study in this area showed that providing disruptive first and second grade boys with services like these **cut in half** the odds that they would be placed in special classes, rated highly disruptive by a teacher or by peers, or be required to repeat a grade in school. These are all signs reflecting the risk of future criminal behavior. Another study showed that providing half of a group of hyperactive 6 to 12 year olds with individual and group therapy, as well as weekly training for their parents, **cut in half** the number who had been charged with a major criminal offense six years later, compared to those children not receiving such services.

Investing in kids is the means to reduce and prevent crime in America and we need to make these investments now before it is too late. If we do not do these things, I fear that the falling juvenile crime rates we have seen the last several years will escape us as quickly as the record growth in juvenile violence caught us so unexpectedly in the mid-1980’s through the early 1990’s.

Making these investments in kids is not incompatible with the need and importance of efforts necessary to enforce our laws and hold criminals accountable for their actions. Ensuring that police and prosecutors have the necessary resources to uphold the rule of law and pursue justice is vital to our nation’s future. Expenditures on both of these fronts are critical, necessary and complementary.

Some of us in law enforcement refer to this as the need to ensure a balanced approach to juvenile justice in America. Balance means exactly what the word implies. It means providing both the training and resources necessary to ensure that America’s police and prosecutors can effectively and efficiently protect the public safety and hold juvenile offenders accountable, while at the same time investing in prevention and early intervention efforts aimed at reducing crime. The National District Attorney’s Association supports such a balanced approach to juvenile justice<sup>7</sup>. No prosecutor in America would rather prosecute someone for committing a crime than prevent that crime from occurring in the first place.

Investing in kids is the means to accomplish this goal. If we enforce the child support obligations of all non-custodial parents, and if we provide our nation’s children access to

quality pre-school programs, and if we assure that America's school age children have access to after-school, weekend and summer youth development programs, and if we identify troubled and disruptive children at an early age and get them and their parents the counseling and help they need, and if we invest in kids in the other ways I have described above, we can prevent juvenile crime before it ever gets out of the starting blocks.

I make no pretense of having all of the answers. I'm not even sure I know all the questions. I am merely an elected law enforcement professional who has been given the privilege by the electorate of trying to make a positive difference in reference to crime and justice in my community. I firmly believe that the biggest difference we can make in this regard is through investing in our children. Law enforcement leaders, however, cannot solve our problems with juvenile crime alone. Everyone in our community - from parents, teachers, school administrators, members of faith communities, business and civic leaders, elected officials, law enforcement professionals, and our youth themselves, among others, must unite in our efforts to ensure that sufficient investments are made in our kids and that a balanced approach to juvenile justice is pursued in America. By working together toward these goals, we can and will make a difference.

For more information concerning how you can join this effort, contact ***Fight Crime: Invest In Kids***, a national non-profit organization of hundreds of police chiefs, sheriffs, prosecutors, crime victims, and others from across America, which exists to promote adequate funding for proven prevention and early intervention strategies to reduce juvenile crime. This organization can be reached at: (202) 776-0027; or through their web-site at: [www.fightcrime.org](http://www.fightcrime.org)

o:\admin\gen\simple solutions to juvenile crime.doc

---

<sup>1</sup> Schweinhart, L.J., H.V. Barnes and D.P. Weikart, *Significant Benefits: The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 27* (Ypsilanti, MI: High-Scope Press, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Lally, J.R., P.L. Mangione and A.S. Honig, "The Syracuse University Family Development Research Program: Long-Range Impact of an Early Intervention with Low-Income Children and Their Families" in D.R. Powell, ed., *Parent Education as Early Childhood Intervention: Emerging Directions in Theory, Research and Practice* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> Jones, M.A. and D.R. Offord, "Reduction of Antisocial Behavior in Poor Children by Nonschool Skill Development," *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry and Allied Disciplines* 30 (1989), 737-750.

<sup>4</sup> Miller, B.M., *Out-of-School Time: Effects on Learning in the Primary Grades* (Wellesley, MA: School-Age Child Care Project [now called the National Institute on Out-of-School Time], Center for Research on Women, Wellesley College, 1995); and Posner, J.K. and D.L. Vandell, "Low-Income Children's After-School Care: Are there Beneficial Effects of After-School Programs," *Child Development* 65 (Society for Research in Child Development, 1994) 440-456.

<sup>5</sup> Olds, D.L., et al., "Long-term Effects of Home Visitation on Maternal Life Course and Child Abuse and Neglect: Fifteen-year Follow-up of a Randomized Trial," *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Vol. 278, No. 8, August 27, 1997, pp. 637-652. and Olds, et al., "Long-term Effects of Nurse Home Visitation on Children's Criminal and Antisocial Behavior: 15-Year Follow-up of a Randomized Controlled Trial," *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Vol. 280, No. 14, October 14, 1998, pp. 1238-1244.

<sup>6</sup> National Institute of Justice, "Helping to Prevent Child Abuse — Future Criminal Consequences: Hawaii Healthy Start" (October 1995)

<sup>7</sup> Backstrom, J.C. and G. L. Walker, "A Balanced Approach to Juvenile Justice: The Work of the Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee", *The Prosecutor*, July/August 1998.